

WEB-BASED SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ENGINEERING PROJECT DESIGN

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates generally to the field of information retrieval, and more specifically to a Web-based system and method for conducting research pertaining to engineering project data, and for providing an engineering design process having a real-time interface with Internet resources.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The global computer network known as the Internet is based on standard protocols that allow computers to communicate with each other even if using different software vendors, thus allowing anyone with a computer global accessibility to servers and databases connected to the Internet world wide. The wealth of available information makes the Internet a valuable tool for technical research and engineering design applications. Using a Web browser, a user can access Web sites containing databases of industry standard information for materials and components, online university engineering information, design calculators, manufacturer information, and relevant regulatory information.

Searches of the Internet are typically conducted using powerful search engines, such as ALTA VISTA, YAHOO, EXCITE, GOOGLE, and HOTBOT. These search engines are content dependent and queries are conducted as keyword searches using Boolean operators. The limitations of the search engine algorithms can result in multiple irrelevant responses to a keyword query, making such a search extremely time consuming and labor intensive. For

example, a keyword search for "pump" and "lift station," as might be conducted by a civil engineer seeking product data, would return any number of documents which happen to include the keywords.

5 Another drawback is that the search engines are capable of searching only a fraction of the Internet's content. Most search engines search at most only the home page of a Web site, and data embedded in the site will not be located by the search engine. Web site information can be "stacked" in multiple layers, requiring the searcher to "sift" through the layers a time-consuming process to locate usable data. The desired information can also be in an "unsearchable" format such as Adobe Acrobat® (.pdf) documents and ASCII text, and again, would not turn up in a standard search engine query.

10 Additionally, due to the wide accessibility of the Internet, information retrieved from the Internet may be from a source of questionable legitimacy. The results returned by a search engine in response to a user query are not "screened" for the accuracy and validity of the information, and it is therefore up to the user to make this determination.

15 Another drawback associated with the search engine databases is that links are often moved or deleted after the search engine indexes the sites. This results in search results with numerous "dead ends." It is also possible to manipulate the content of a Web site to cause the search engine to artificially rank the site higher in relevancy than other Web sites, which can cause misleading search results.

20 In view of the inherent limitations and inefficiency of Internet search engines, particularly with regard to locating technical and engineering data, it would be desirable to catalog technical information available on the Internet so as to provide a method which will allow a user quickly

and conveniently access the information.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 It is an object of the invention to provide a Web-based method for engineering project design and engineering research for a plurality of engineering disciplines.

It is another object to provide a database of URL links indexed to allow a user to readily locate a Web page using a predefined search system.

It is still another object to provide a graphical user interface which allows a user to query the URL data using a cascading drop-down menu process.

10 It is a further object of the invention to provide a database of URL links which are categorized by engineering disciplines and conventional engineering projects within the engineering disciplines.

It is yet a further object of the invention to provide a method for performing information retrieval from multiple databases without the use of keyword-type search engines

15 It is still a further object of the invention to provide a method which arranges and permits access to existing databases currently stored on multiple computer systems and formats it in such a way that it can be retrieved at any discrete location within the various levels of the databases.

It is still another object of the invention to provide an engineering design process having a real-time interface with Internet resources.

20 It is yet another object of the invention to systematically insert the retrieved information into a Job Folder Checklist, which will contain all the information necessary for a user to put together a total job package.

In accordance with the above objects, a method of engineering project design using a real-time interface with a global computer network comprises creating a database for approved engineering specific Universal Record Locator (URL) links and indexing the database according to predetermined engineering search queries. The method includes providing a graphical user interface (GUI) allowing a user to: (i) perform a categorized database inquiry for an engineering project by using a cascading drop-down menu process, (ii) input critical parameters regarding the specification and requirements for the engineering project; and (iii) compile project information into a job folder checklist. The URL links are retrieved according to the database inquiry, and Web pages related to the retrieved URL links are accessed to display pertinent information of the accessed Web pages. The information is then inserted into the job folder checklist.

The method of engineering project design further includes displaying of a plurality of engineering disciplines, listing of conventional engineering projects within each engineering discipline, and providing a design process template for each engineering discipline integrated into the GUI. The design process template prompts a user to input the required parameters for the engineering project. The design process template includes formulas for a selected engineering project and a drop-down menu for a selected engineering project.

The method further includes the steps of performing iterative calculations to arrive at an acceptable final design and inserting the design data into the job folder checklist. The iterative calculations are based on material specifications, component specifications, and design tables acquired from a Web page review. The method further includes the step of displaying and printing of a flow diagram detailing the engineering project.

The method also includes the step of inputting the geographic location of the engineering

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

Fig. 1 is a schematic illustration of a computer system configuration in which the invention is used in a preferred embodiment;

Fig. 2 is an example of a drop-down menu for engineering discipline selection according

a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3A illustrates a job folder checklist on a display screen according a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 B illustrates an alternative arrangement of the job folder checklist;

Figs. 4A and 4B are a flow chart of the steps for creating the job folder checklist according a preferred embodiment of the present invention; and

Fig.5 is a flow chart of the design process.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Although the invention will be described in terms of a specific embodiment, it will be readily apparent to those skilled in this art that various modifications, rearrangements, and substitutions can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention. The scope of the invention is defined by the claims appended hereto.

In Fig. 1 illustrates a typical computer/network configuration in which the present invention is used in a preferred embodiment. One or more client workstations 11 are in bi-directional communication with a network via a Web browser program running on the client workstation. The network may be a local area network (LAN), wide area network (WAN), or the Internet. The web browser running on the client workstations 11 is a software program that allows a user at the client workstations 11 to transmit and receive data over a computer network such as the Internet. Client workstations 11 can be any computer that is capable of providing access to the web server using a web browser, such as standard desktop computer systems, laptop computers, non-programmable terminals connected to a main frame, etc.

The client workstations 11 are coupled to an Internet server 23. In the preferred embodiment, the Internet server 23 operates in Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP). HTTP is a communications protocol that supports distributed collaborative information systems over the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) packet based routing system used by the Internet. HTTP defines how messages are formatted and transmitted, and what actions Web servers and browsers should take in response to various command. HTTP request methods to access network resources include the Uniform Resource Identifier (URI); Uniform Resource Locator (URL); or Uniform Resource Name (URN). Other HTTP request methods include

Simple Mail Transport Protocol (SMTP) and File Transport Protocol (FTP). A network resource is a network server or database which can be identified by a URI, URL, or URN. For example, the URL "http://www.name.com/file.html" specifies a web page that should be retrieved using HTTP protocol, and URL "ftp://www.name.com/file.exe" specifies an executable file to be retrieved using FTP protocol.

Internet server 23 is in communication with a URL database 25 which consists of a plurality of cataloged URL links. The protocols by which Internet server 23 communicates with URL database 25 are well known in the art, and are not discussed in detail herein. The URL links preferably correlate to Web pages which are approved, pre-selected engineering specific Web sites. Such sites include, but are not limited to, manufacturer sites for materials and components, regulatory information, library references, contractor sites, university sites, ASTM references, ANSI references, military references, etc. The URL links in the database 25 are indexed according to pre-determined engineering search queries. As will be described in detail hereinafter, the method of the invention allows users at client workstations 11 to receive a specific URL link in response to a predefined engineering query, allowing the user to access the desired Web site using a Web browser. The method of the present invention provides the user direct access to multiple layers of detailed information without having to conduct a time-consuming search through layers of information using a search engine.

Internet server 23 includes a software application 21 running thereon which can be accessed through a Web site from a client workstation 11 via a Web browser. Alternatively, the software application 21 can be resident on the local media of the client workstation 11. The software application 21 provides a Graphical User Interface (GUI) at client workstation 11. The

software application 21 coordinates with the URL database 25 to provide responses to user queries executed through the GUI. The GUI provides a means to direct a user at a client workstation 11 through hierarchal levels of information in predetermined search categories. In a preferred embodiment, the GUI utilizes a cascaded drop down menu process.

5 In the preferred embodiment of the invention, software application 21 allows a user (1) to select a specific engineering discipline, such as civil, electrical, mechanical, etc., and then (2) to select a specific type of engineering project within the discipline. The projects are standard, well-known project types within the disciplines with known requirements, parameters and algorithms. The project types are common to the respective industries and preferably have standard titles recognizable by all users.

10 Fig. 2 illustrates a drop down menu selection process provided by the GUI to select the discipline and project. Each discipline corresponds to a plurality of projects within the disciplines. In the illustrated example, a user has selected "Electronic" engineering 31, and a list of predetermined projects 33 in the electronic engineering field is then displayed. The projects can include subcategories of projects accessed by cascading submenus.

15 The GUI also displays a "Job Folder Checklist" which corresponds to the selected engineering project. An example Job Folder Checklist 12 is illustrated in Fig. 3A. The Job Folder Checklist itemizes the data and required research and reference materials for the project. The elements of the Job Folder Checklist can include, but is not limited to, design tables, calculations, selected materials, selected components, RFI and RFP lists, regulatory information, permit information, and a detail of the construction process. The format of the Job Folder Checklist 12 allows a user to insert information and data as it is obtained for future reference.

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The Job Folder Checklist 12 also preferably includes a means to graphically "check off" the required items as the information is gathered to provide a visual indication of the status of the project. The graphical format shown in Fig. 3A is for illustrative purposes only, and the Job Folder Checklist of the present invention can have any suitable graphic format. As shown in Fig. 3B, the Job Folder Checklist 12 can include an additional window 14 which can be toggled on and off to view individual information items saved in the Job Folder Checklist 12. Some of the information to be inserted into the Job Folder Checklist 12 will be data retrieved from Internet sources. Since the retrieved data originates from different sources, it may be in a variety of formats, such as HTML files, .pdf files, text files, graphic files, .jpg files, etc. The information inserted in to the respective categories of the Job Folder Checklist are therefore preferably maintained as discrete files within the Job Folder Checklist. In this way, the appropriate application can be launched to access the saved data in the Job Folder Checklist.

A first set of steps performed by the software application 21 is shown in Fig. 4A. A user at client workstation 11 initially logs onto Internet server 23 via a Web site preferably by providing account qualifier data 31. Account qualifier data can consist of an account number or a password, singly or in combination. Once logged onto Internet server 23, enumerated Job Folder Checklists which have been previously saved by the user or the account holder are displayed. The user is prompted to select "Create New Job Folder" or "Modify Existing Job Folder." If the user elects to "Modify Existing Job Folder," the user selects a Job Folder for further revision or review.

The steps performed to create a new Job Folder Checklist are shown in Fig. 4B. The user is prompted to select a location where a job is to be performed 45. This process can be

achieved through a number of methods known in the art, such as by inputting a postal code.

Once the location has been identified, the URL database is filtered 47 so that only data relevant to the selected location is displayed. However, the user has the option to override the filtering step and choose other regulations based on their knowledge of the project requirements. If regulation is chosen outside the filtered database, a cautionary note can be added identifying a potential risk to meeting requirements.

A user accesses a regulation data base using a drop down menu process 48. The regulation data base preferably includes federal, state, county and local regulations for the selected location. Regulatory information relevant to the location is displayed on the menu. Through the GUI menu, the user can then obtain the URL information for the desired regulations, and access the Web site containing the information. Pertinent regulatory information can then be located and added to the Job Folder Checklist 12 (step 49). When all regulations have been located, the appropriate box is then preferably automatically checked off.

In steps 51 and 52, the engineering discipline and project selected in the manner described above. As stated previously, the elements of the Job Folder Checklist 12 are then "customized" for the specific project. In addition, a design template for the specific project is accessed 54 and integrated into the GUI. The elements of the design template can include an input screen for user input of required parameters for the project. The design template also preferably includes the necessary formulas for performing the required calculations for the project. In the preferred embodiment, on-screen calculators are provided. The design template also includes flow chart forms for the specific project which can be edited by the user. After the design template is integrated into the GUI, the drop-down menu is preferably "customized" for

the specific project. In step 55, the URL database is preferably filtered based on the project selection so that the user does not have to sort through extraneous information in the design process.

5 After the required parameters for the project are entered, the user can begin the design process. The steps of a design process 50 according to the method of the invention is illustrated in Fig. 5, however the invention is not limited in this regard. The design process of the invention can follow any desired sequence to achieve the desired results.

10 The user initially enters the parameters for the project 71. The parameters consist of the project specifications and requirements for the particular job. Using the GUI, the user can obtain required information by accessing relevant Web sites on the Internet. The sites are pre-selected and approved engineering sites, thus eliminating the need to search for information using a keyword search engine. The indexed URL database 25 returns the address for the target Web site, allowing the user to immediately access the site. The user can access a design table database 73 and a materials database 75. The materials selected have material properties that impact the design calculations. Using the information from the design table database and the materials database, the user can perform calculations 77 using the project calculators. The process can be repeated in an iterative process 79 until the requirements are met. The user can then select components by first accessing the component database 83. Again, the selection process is iterative, and the specifications are revised until the requirements are met. If desired, the user can also factor in monetary costs into the process by using, for example, supplier price lists.

20 After it is determined that the design specifications are optimized, the design data is inserted in the job folder checklist 81, along with pertinent design tables and material specifications. As

each piece of information is transitioned in to the Job Folder Checklist 12, the appropriate boxes are automatically checked off.

The user can access a contractor database 85 to develop construction procedures 87. The construction procedures are iteratively formulated 89, and are inserted into the job folder checklist 91 when finalized. The construction procedures can be inserted into a project flow chart template.

After the design process 50 is complete, the completed Job Folder Checklist 12 includes the specification data for the optimal design of the project. The completed Job Folder Checklist 12 also contains other relevant information required for the project including reference materials, design tables, regulatory information, drawings, etc. The Job Folder Checklist 12 can also include procedural flow charts for the job to be performed.

The Job Folder Checklist 12 can be saved and archived on Internet server 23, and is preferably password protected for security. The contents of the completed Job Folder Checklist 12 can be printed in an industry recognized format, or it can be accessed electronically by other authorized users.

It is to be understood that while a certain form of the invention is illustrated, it is not to be limited to the specific form or arrangement of parts herein described and shown. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various changes may be made without departing from the scope of the invention and the invention is not to be considered limited to what is shown and described in the specification and drawings.